

Chapter 1: The Riddle

by Orrien

*An artificial being
Where waters spin and flow
But there has never been
Any familiar glow*

These words sounded like the neverending song in the Spirit's head. Not that it was something bad - it felt more like the dream that you're trying to remember. It has been nearly a month since Spirit Sakura spoke her latest riddle. Since then, it has been slowly becoming one of the "unsolved" cases, where spirits lost their interest after investigating without fruition. There was that one Spirit, which didn't give up though. Why? That is a good question. Was it the desire to be the one who unravels the meaning of the message to others? Or to experience something unexperienced before? Maybe a special bond between him and Sakura? The answers didn't matter. The goal was to decipher the riddle.

Of course the literal meaning was unlikely, but the spirits checked all water reservoirs in the whole Hoa. Even the Dandelion Lake, the biggest and deepest of them all was searched far and wide, with no results of potential... What were they looking for anyways? A forgotten artifact? A vital piece of knowledge? Because they didn't know what to expect spirits started to eventually run in circles in the search for answers. In the past time spirits closely observed any storm and changing water currents, visited Daar Storages, a place deep underground where Daar keep their precious materials. Because it was the place which spirits didn't usually attend, looking through that place sounded convincing. The problem was, in Hoa spirits lived everywhere and their presence was already registered in all parts of the forest. Thus the second part of the riddle still remained an unanswered question. After investigating closely all water-related phenomenon the search was classified as "unsolved" and moved to the special place in the Archives.

The failure hasn't discouraged our Spirit, who was wandering through the grove. The sun was setting and the stars started appearing on the orange sky. Wind blew delicately causing the trees to sing above Spirit's head. He walked with the head up, repeating the riddle again and again. The night seemed peaceful as never before, with noone there to disturb it. That's why a sudden fall was so unexpected. Only after the event did the Spirit realize he stepped on an entrance to the Burrows. Shocked spirit got up and looked around.

Yes, they were Convoluteds Burrows, home of the Foxes in Hoa. Spirit noticed he feels uncomfortable lying there in complete silence and darkness, as the Burrows were reaching deeper than one could think. He stood up, brushing down the dust. Dust? He looked again. Indeed it was dust, which meant that part of the Burrows was uninhabited, or at least not attended in a while. This fact distracted the Spirit from his goal, but only for a minute. Determined to get out, he quickly made a torch and began exploring the Burrows. As he knew, they weren't called "Convoluteds" without a reason. It was fairly easy to get lost in them, if one didn't memorize the route. And because this part was unknown to our explorer he had no clue which path to take. Surprisingly, that took his mind even further from the riddle, as exploring unknown parts of the forest was always something entertaining.



The riddle. *"But there has never been any familiar glow"*. Was that it? An interest in deciphering sparked again in Spirit's mind. Encouraged even more he started walking faster, not thinking about paths he was taking. What caught his attention were the drawing on the stone walls, scattered as he was going deeper. Most of them depicted past events or already known facts such as detailed plan of the Archives or , which may sound uninteresting. But not for the Spirit. He knew such drawings were an indicator of entering Foxes' Wisdom, where their knowledge was kept. Not that spirits never have been there, but it was rumoured that there are tunnels yet unexplored.

Spirit was brooding over those facts, thus he didn't notice when Burrows started to twist even more. Paintings were suddenly gone, and so was his torch. Even though Hoa spirits shine bright, it was not enough to lighten such darkness. Without resources to craft a new one he was forced to continue searching sightless. And it was not something entertaining anymore. Though the thrill of adventure was a pleasant feeling, it was wearing off, with the fear awakening in its place. He had reasons to feel that way.

"Where am I?", "Why are there no foxes here?", "Am I proceeding somewhere or just running in circles?" These questions started taking over his mind. With each step he felt more lost, the opposite of what he thought he'd feel. No light reached that part, nor stars could shine above his head. Foxes were known for their night vision ability, so lack of any light source was not something unexpected. He continued the journey running from one wall to another, rubbing against countless roots running through the tunnel.

No sign of any hope shone on the horizon, until just before giving up Spirit stumbled upon an old chest. It was the least expected thing he thought he'd find there. With yet another sparkle in his eyes he opened it, causing loads of dust to cover the area and him to cough relentlessly. Inside, what seemed like a coincidence, he found all needed items to craft a torch. After the flame was lit, Spirit raised his head. Before him he saw a dead end of the tunnel, with another painting on a massive wall. But it was different. After looking closely, it was the map. Not just any map, it was the map of the lands beyond Hoa. To the south, a small, circle area was signed "Kainar". Much bigger area, bigger than Hoa, on the north was signed using red paint as "Altum". A water canal connected Hoa with what appeared to be a lone island on the Great Waters, marked as "Elysium". Spirit stood there with eyes wide open, closely studying each smallest mark on the wall. He never heard of the other lands from spirits, nor from foxes.

Now everything seemed connected. *"Where waters spin and flow"*, it was an island surrounded with water after all. *"But there has never been any familiar glow"*. No spirit from Hoa could have been there, as the map was not recorded in the Archives. It had to be that. Spirit hurriedly scribbled the map on the piece of paper found in the dusty chest. With the light quickly running out it was time to look for an exit. Tenaciously burrowing between the vines and rocks he found a hole just his size. With no other option to go and the leavings of the torch he began climbing up, taking one last, longing look at the little hideout before.

At last, a way to the surface was found. The moon was high on the sky, silence was omnipresent. But it no longer was a peaceful night. It was the night of the greatest discovery in Spirits life. Possibly the greatest discovery in whole Hoa. Who made the original map? Was it someone who inhabited the forest before spirits? Or maybe this information was meant to be forgotten? Those were not the questions for that time.

Now it was time to find Elysium.

Chapter 2: A Keepsake from Home

The sun filled Hoa with the light in every corner. Trees were bending to the all sides, making the impression of a natural labyrinth. Higher branches were merging and forming a tunnel, where petals flew through the air as if no wind was there to twirl them. Through such tunnel the Spirit was going. Still shocked after the recent discovery he was slowly approaching the end of the passage.

It was a great place to be face to face with one's feelings. A place to sit and contemplate about yourself, your actions, your desires. And that time Spirit really needed. Each step felt more unsure than previous one, as if he wanted to stay there and think. Two counter feelings were tearing him apart: the motivation, the desire to continue his journey, and the other, less known but equally powerful: a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. A doubt of the goal he found.

"What if this is just a big misunderstanding?" "Am I really ready to leave everything I love behind to chase something I don't know if even exists?"

Eventually he sat on the ground, covering his head, trying to detach from the unpleasant feelings. But they were not going anywhere. Suddenly Spirit stood up and started running. He ran blindly across the tunnel, forgetting about the spiritual alleviation it was meant to grant. Seconds later, the tunnel was empty, with only petals flowing intermittently.

A burden of a great discovery is not something easy to carry. But because of his inner desire to solve this case he was conflicted. Without stopping he ran, with thoughts battling until he reached a small hill. There he finally fell down on the ground.

It was one of his favorite places. From there you could see even half of the forest, but not be seen, because the trees served as a great cover. The sky was clear with no clouds above, branches were silently swaying, and the sun was penetrating through the trees. In the distance, Spirit Sakura was shining its light, filling the gloomy corners with the purple light.

It was truly a place where one could forget about all problems bothering them. Spirit was sitting there, clasping his curled up legs and staring at Sakura, mesmerized with the calming glow.

"Am I ready to leave you... mom"....

- Hon?

Spirit flinched hearing his name. Of course, he knew who asked. Only his best friend could know about this magical spot. Spirit turned his head to see a fox approaching. Even though he was still young, he already was twice as big as the spirit.

- Ashi... hey - Spirit replied, forcing the sentence to sound with a light tone. But because emotions were not backing down he quickly looked away, laying eyes upon Sakura again. Fox came closer and sat next to Hon.

- Hey... - Finding fitting words was not an easy task. - Feeling down today huh?

Spirit only subtly shook his head. He wanted to say something, but everything sounded awkward in his mind. It was not easy to speak for him at that time.

With no response, Ashi laid down in silence. Sometimes everything one needs is to sit together in silence...

- I can't take it - Hon finally found courage to speak. He tried to elaborate but after a second he just turned back. Ashi had no intentions to encourage his friend to speak. So they both sat there, watching the sun slowly setting on the far horizon and the land filling with the purple glow.

After a while, Hon spoke again, this time with more courage

- Ashi... can you keep a secret?

The fox laughed in response.

- Why are you asking me that? You know I can. Especially if it's my best friend's secret.

With visible sign of relief on spirit's face he began chaotically telling the fox about everything what happened yesterday: the exploration in the Burrows, finding the lair and finally the other lands beyond Hoa. Ashi listened carefully, waving his tail idly as he was absorbed in the story. After he finished, Hon started breathing easily. At last, he was not alone with his discovery. That feeling immediately made him feel a lot better.

- So... what are you planning to do? - fox asked, throwing his companion a questioning look.

- You see, that's the point. I don't know. - spirit replied, hanging his head.

- For a second I thought I would embark on an adventure of my life, figuring out what Sakura meant... but later I realized I'm not ready for that. I'm not ready to leave my friends, my home, you, Her... - Hon cut in the middle of the sentence.

- Wasn't it your dream however? To explore, to solve one of Sakura's riddles by yourself? - Ashi gently asked, knowing about his friend's everyday, sometimes surreal plans.

- It was... But it's no longer - Hon whispered with a pent-up voice.

- I am not ready, not ready...

He kept repeating those last words like a broken disc. Fox stood up and looked right into spirit's eyes. The latter tried to look away again but he couldn't escape his friend's serious look.

- Listen. There's nothing worse you could do than not following what your heart says. Even if it looks like something unreachable, surreal, bizzare, it doesn't matter - chase your dreams, and don't let anything or anyone stop you. But also, don't stop yourself from achieving your goal.

Stars started appearing on the sky, and the sun almost completely disappeared. Fox continued:

- I understand that you are attached to what you love, everyone is. But when time comes, you have to be able to move forward. After all, it's not like you leave that forever. Additionally, it will always be in your memory. Speaking of which...

Ashi jumped and disappeared, leaving Hon alone on the hill. He looked at the forest again. Stars were reflecting in Dandelion Lake, making an impression of small lights dancing on the surface. The labyrinth he escaped from today was no longer a symbol of the battling thoughts. Now, filled with Sakura's light, it truly looked like a place to seek rest. The whole view was just... magnificent. What Ashi said was true, of course. But why was it so hard to acknowledge that?

Hon took a look a little higher, where he could see the seacoast. Waves were smoothly hitting the shore, almost like if they encouraged him to flow with them. He felt the inner adventurous spirit awakening, the one he was trying to quash. But it couldn't be fully gone ever - it was a part of him. And even though such strong attachment kept him here, that desire was still there. And it would be there no matter how hard he would try to silence it.

Ashi returned, holding what looked like a bag in his muzzle. He dropped it next to the spirit.

- You know, it was funny when you asked me if I can keep a secret. My grandfather told me once that he was asked the same. When I tried to get what was it from him, he only laughed and said: "Even though she is gone, it does not mean my promise can be broken". The bag was hanging as a reminder, as a keepsake. Now that he is gone, I think I can give it to you.

Fox pushed the item towards Hon. He stared at it astonished, saying nothing.

- I hope it will remind you of Hoa wherever you are. Remember, you are never alone. And now this will symbolize that.

Ashi was looking expectantly for his friend's reaction. Hon took the bag, curiously examining it from all sides. Then he put it on - it fitted perfectly, as if it was made for him. With sincere joy on his face he hugged the fox, or his head, to be exact.

- Thank you Ashi... - he whispered, holding back the tears.

- Anything for you - fox replied happily.

- I will keep the secret, but I ask you to not stop what you started. Go find the Elysium. Go and solve the riddle.

After that, they sat together, watching the sun hiding its last rays in the distance.

Splashing of the water was never so calming but thrilling at the same time. Everything seemed ready - the boat was on the shore ready to departure, all reserves

packed. The map safely lied in the bag. It was happening so fast, but it was not a problem anymore.

Hon caught a glimpse of Sakura between the trees, as he was looking for Ashi. He was no longer scared of leaving her, no. He wanted to make her proud. He smiled.

- Here you are - Ashi noiselessly appeared on the coast. - What a beautiful night, isn't it?

Hon nodded. No one knew about his adventure, so he had to leave at night. He jumped on the boat, making sure once more that everything was in the right place. Ashi came to push the boat to the sea.

- Ashi... - spirit hesitated. There was so much he wanted to tell his friend, but in reality he knew it would be only stalling the inevitable.

- ... thank you. For everything.

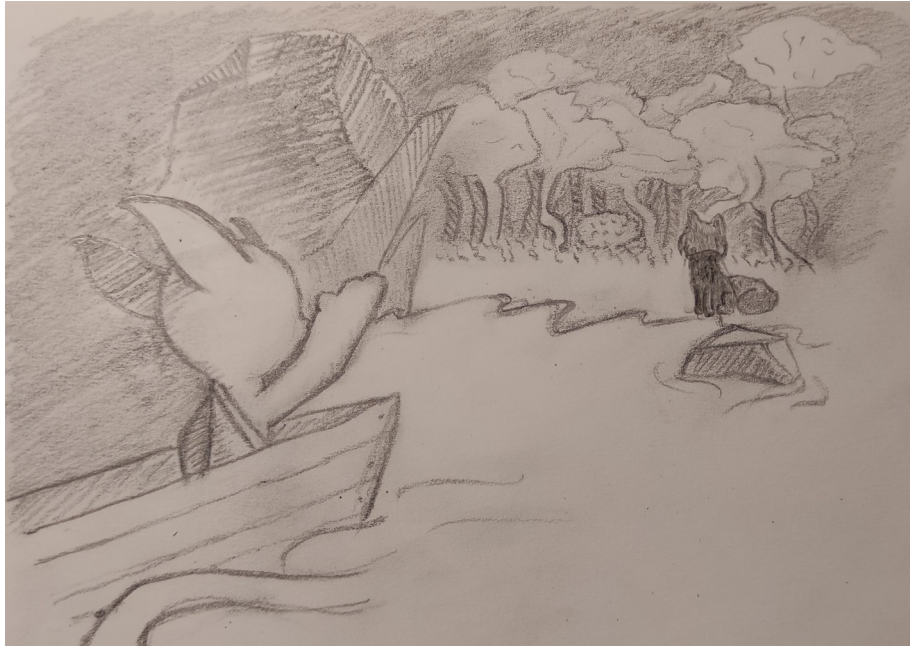
They hugged again, longer than usual. Both of them knew it was their last meeting for who knows how long.



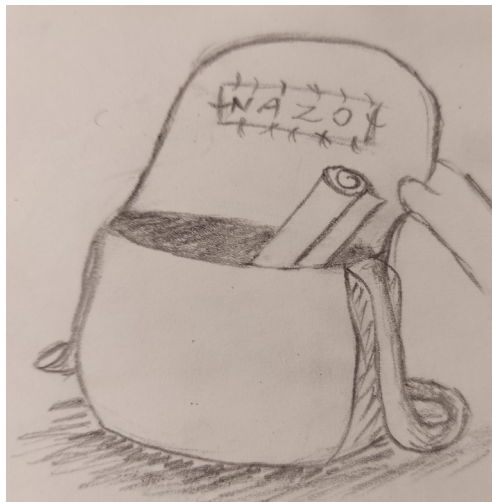
- Have a good voyage! And may the gift remind you of us wherever you end up.

Fox made the final push causing the boat to float on the water. Two friends exchanged a last farewell look. For a while spirit leant on the board. Purple glow was slowly fading in the distance.

"Goodbye"



And so, the adventure began. Hon, finally on the way to the truth sat in the back of the boat. He took the map to check if the direction is right, but something else caught his attention instead. On the inside he noticed a raggedy badge. Taking a closer look revealed what was written on it.



"Nazo"

Stunned with another discovery he instantly looked back on the coast, shouting several times:

"Aaashiii! Who is Nazo!"

But his voice only echoed in the void as Ashi was already gone. Having another mystery was too much to handle for one day. He laid down, holding the bag tightly in his hands. Just before he fell asleep he thought:

"Elysium... I'm coming"

And his eyes closed.

Chapter 3: A New Reality

Waters were silent. Maybe you could even say, more than usual. Silence reached even further - no sound was ever heard from the shores. The land itself was... ill. Trees were growing, but not fruiting. Wind was blowing, but instead of relief, it brought fatigue. Some creatures could be seen but they were... stone. Whenever Hon looked at one, a chill went up his spine. At the same time, he was curious. He wanted to touch it, examine, look closer. Once he even thought about stopping next to a statue and taking a look. Fortunately, common sense did not abandon him - in a dangerous environment like this, there is no time for sightseeing.

The illness got to Hon too. Excitement and willingness were replaced by fatigue and despondence. Every move, even slightest, was followed by pain. It was difficult to even have a small walk around. What seemed to be left was sitting in the back of the boat and thinking.

He had to focus, which, surprisingly, was quite easy. Circumstances spirit found himself in were perfect for spending some time with himself. And thinking.

About home. About Sakura, Ashi. About Elysium and the riddle. About Nazo. The latter caught his attention for a second, after all, he was carrying her bag now. Who was she? The simple answer would be just a Hoa spirit from before years. And for now he stuck with that belief. Why would she be anyone special anyway.

Hoa. Home. He left without saying properly goodbye. Without even saying "Everything will be fine, don't worry". Everything seemed so easy at that time - go, discover, return. But the longer the journey was taking, the more he realized his perception was flawed. He wanted to prove to everyone he can solve the riddle on his

own. That he is not a constant failure.

That he matters.

Riddle. Sakura. He left her. She cared for him all the time, she was his consolation. Whenever he was feeling down, he would sit by her roots and watch dandelions dancing on the surface of the lake. And they would stay like that, without talking. Words are not needed to comfort. In fact, they can be a distractor from feelings that unravel softly. Let them. Let them tell your sorrows for you. Let them express your grief, your loneliness for you.

Feelings don't hide. Feelings don't lie.

But now there was no one there to sit with him. No one to speak with. No one to unravel feelings before. Only grief and loneliness. And fear.

Then his sight went onto the bag. The only thing that reminded him of everything he left behind. Hon grabbed it. He wanted to feel the familiar cloth under his fingers. In one second he was reminded of Ashi, who gave him the present. He was reminded of the sunset they watched together. Of the purple light shining between the woods. Of Sakura.

And he let those memories come to him. He held onto them, trying to feel the moment, recalling as many details as he could. The warmth, the company, the excitement.

Quick glimpse on the map let him know he was approaching the island. At least he thought he was - measuring length on the sea was not something he did before. Morbid shores were fading in the distance, as he entered open waters. Here tides were hitting the boat from multiple sides. It took a while to get the course in order. The illness was wearing off as well, so Hon could stand up and prepare himself. With each passing hour he felt more and more excited. Constantly tapping on the afterdeck or nervously fidgeting, he was looking out for his destination to appear in front of him.

And it did.

A tall, hazy mountain full of trees rolled over the horizon. A couple of minutes later bright, sandy shore appeared as well. Hon rubbed his eyes again and again. *"So it IS true..."*

Right away the big preparation started. He was going back and forth making sure everything was buttoned up. In all the hurry, one detail slipped his attention - as he was getting closer to the island, water around got darker and darker. Murky, somewhat greeny colour was replaced by deep blue. One would think why would he bother about such small bagatelle like color change. Hon was about to find out.

He looked back one last time, but saw something he was not ever expecting to see - a giant fin was gliding on the surface with blistering speed. Its shiny edge was easily visible from the distance. And with each second the shine was getting closer and closer.

Hon froze in place. Long weeks without any danger made him completely vulnerable. And now there he was, chased by an unknown creature in an unknown place without any seeming help. All excitement about the journey was gone - the only thing he had in mind now was surviving. Execrating his lack of attention he was desperately looking to the right and left.

Unfortunately, in the open ocean you don't have many places where you could hide. What was left was sailing to Elysium.

And so the chase began. Hon, focusing all his strength on oaring, and the creature, silently following him, lathering waves around. At that point he was frightened to look behind. Even though the spirit couldn't hear the enemy, it was obvious the creature was sitting on his neck.

One thought occupied his mind:

"Swim faster", "Faster", "FASTER".

But his arms weakened. His breath was intensive as ever. Darkness slowly started appearing before his eyes.

"... faster, swim faster...."

Spirit heard billowy waves just behind him. His eyes became watery. The shore was so close...

"...faster..."

The boat juddered. Hon flipped over in the air, gave a longing shout, then everything disappeared in the deep blueness. A shade covered the surface as spirit sunk into the depths.

"...swim..."

A smell of cooked fish woke Hon up.

But he didn't open eyes. Spirit laid in darkness, quite comfortable darkness actually, enjoying every breath. The stress, the fear, the pain - they were all gone. Except pain maybe, as his head still hurt a little. He didn't know where he was, what he was going to do. He forgot about his goal. He wanted to smell the fish.

- Oh, you awake already? - a middle-age but energetic female voice interrupted the silence.

His eyes opened immediately. First thing Hon saw was a ceiling made of big, pointy leaves, held by thin, wooden sticks. Gentle steps reminded him he's not alone. Spirit sat on the "bed".

- Ah, splendid, splendid! - a cheerful female voice expressed approval. Hon looked at the source of it.



Before him stood a peculiar being. Almost two times taller than him, she was wearing a dress, or a cloak, made of long, pale-yellow grass-like material, which reached from mouth all the way to the floor. Across the clothing went a thin string, decorated with shells and pearls of all colours. Going up, he met a friendly look from two friendly looking, glowing eyes, hidden in the shade of a hat. The hat itself was made of palm leaves, cut and trimmed so they formed a cone shape.

Being turned back to a pot, from where the smell of well-cooked fish was coming.

- Who... who are you? Where am I? - Hon asked, still with a weak voice. She turned again.

- I'm Bosei, and you are in my kitchen, dearie. - being said that as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. - Now, if you excuse me, fish won't cook itself!

Taking another look at the room, Hon noticed it's much smaller than he thought. It was made of wooden sticks, tightly bound together, though that didn't stop sun rays from slipping between. The "kitchen" was now full of steam, Bosei was finishing cooking. Because his bed stood in the corner, Hon could clearly see the layout of the room: door to the right, pot in the front, a ladder (which was probably leading to the "second floor") to the left.

At first, he wanted to run around the place and examine every corner, every detail, as that was something new, something exciting - seeing foreign architecture, unknown solutions to the same, familiar problems. But the weakness painfully reminded of itself, and Hon, after a deep sigh, had no other thing to do other than rest.

Bosei poured a mixture into a coconut shell, and was ready to serve it. At that moment, no one could resist the appetizing smell. Hon reached to his hip, but when his hand met no resistance he freaked out.

- Where is it?! - he shouted, so loudly that Bosei almost spilled the fish mixture.

- Careful with that shouting, I was working hard on that soup - she said with the tone of disappointed kindergarten teacher. - What are you missing, dearie?

- My bag! - Hon immediately replied, and was ready to stand up. But he did that too fast and instead fell on the bed again. At that second he felt insecure. Like a part of him was taken from away.

And he did not like that feeling.

- Oh right, right. Where did I... Ah! Here it is! - Bosei triumphantly handed her guest the item. Spirit quickly grabbed it from her hands, holding it tightly.

It looked fine as always, like if it didn't remember any accidents. Holding it made him feel instantly better, if not physically, then mentally. Feeling of safety and familiarity came to him naturally, and he wanted to keep it for as long as he possibly could.

After checking everything was on its place, especially the map, he could finally savor the food. Bosei was a fine cook, so it was flavourful. The chef herself was still moving around the cauldron.

- Delicious, isn't it? This one turned out very well. If only I added a little bit, a tiny bit more salt... Oh and your bag, beautiful, beautiful! It almost reminds me of that legend...

But Hon ignored further talking and focused entirely on soup.

After finishing eating, he was ready for exploration. The moment he was waiting for. The peak of his journey. The solution of the riddle.

"You will be proud of me, mom"

- So... is this Elysium? - he asked carefully.

Bosei, who appeared to not care about being ignored earlier replied eagerly:

- Elysium Falls, ah yes, yes! The most glamorous place around. Do you hear the waters flowing elegantly like butterfly flies from flower to flower? Do you sense the freshest air, fresh like the freshest fruits!

She raised her hands, as if she wanted to embrace the fresh-fruit air.

- You are lucky you get to see that, dearie. If it wasn't for them, you would end up on the bottom of the Sea of Shadows. - here she shook her head in a disapproval. Hon

was trying his best to brindle curiosity and not to dwell into another topic about other areas.

- Sea of... ? Whatever. What exactly happened back there?

- Oh dearie, if only I knew... but you will have to ask them. My task was to help you recover, and looks like it worked, didn't it?

Bosei was clearly satisfied with her job, but at the same time clearly saddened she couldn't help the spirit. Hon was getting more nervous, because as the conversation went, more new questions appeared rather than answers.

- Who are "they" ?! - his tone was getting slightly annoyed and tired. Bosei looked at him, surprised.

- Spirits, of course. Who else would recklessly disturb the sharks?

Hon fell silent. The information struck him, so hard that he became speechless.

- S-spirits? He-ere...? - he mumbled.

- You look surprised dearie, though you appear to be one yourself. But the second tail, it reminds me of that certain...

Here Hon stopped listening to Bosei and processed the knowledge he got. Spirits were here, in Elysium. Who would have guessed that? Is this what he was trying to discover, long lost kin in a far land?

There was only one way to find out.

He got up, refreshed after trying Bosei's delicacies. Truly, spirit never got to experience such cuisine, even though the look could be deceiving. Before opening the door, he turned one last time to his caretaker.

- Bosei... thank you so much. Oh, my name is Hon. - he realized lack of manners too late.

- You are an excellent cook, the soup was-

- Delicious, I know dearie, I know! - she giggled. - I won't hold you back any longer, excitement is painted on your face. Stay safe, Hon!

Spirit smiled, and after a short but confident wave left the hut. Bosei tossed shells away, submerged in thoughtfulness. Subconsciously she placed another pot over a small fire. Then she turned again to the door, which through her guest left minutes ago. Her glowing eyes looked intensively at the place, as if she tried to pierce through it with just plain sight.

She said to herself:

- So the legend was true after all. And the tale of Nazo the Adventurer is as real as my soup.

Satisfied with observation she went onto washing another fish.

Chapter 4: Turn, Turn, Turn Again

*Once two-tailed spirit has come to this place,
Never seen before, never seen again.
Her presence left subtle but visible trace
So those who seek after do not seek in vain.*

They say paradise doesn't exist. That it's something you can only imagine.
Something unreachable. But the truth is, all who say that have just never been to one.

And there was Hon. Standing in the bright sun, he found his paradise.

Palms of different sizes and shades of green surrounded the area he found himself in. Above them, the sun was shining at its brightest. Nearby waterfalls glittered in all colours, and were quietly passing a small lake that formed there.

Butterflies flying above it reminded him of dancing dandelions back home. The spirit smiled. Wind blew delicately, as if trying not to disturb the dance. From time to time a fruit would drop unexpectedly, sinking in the juicy grass.

Everything that felt somewhat familiar, but different at the same time.

It was the feeling he missed while sailing alone. He was scared, scared of what would be before him, but even more, what was behind him. He was scared of losing everything he had, for the sake of something uncertain, something strange.

And that fear was present throughout his journey to Elysium, but in this one moment, it all turned to a feel akin to Sakura's comforting. Because even though the spirit was away from her, the goal of this adventure, which now was about to be revealed, kept him close to his mother.

Hon touched his faithful bag. Another bridge between him and the land he loves. The item that reminded him of all the hopeful moments back home. It was an answer for his loneliness, and the familiarity he was lacking.

To all of that, another thought appeared. Feeling of triumph, accomplishment. He no longer would be the one who fails, no longer a disappointment. No longer omitted among others. Instead he could proudly show up and say "I solved the riddle on my own". He would be recognized.

He would never be alone anymore.

That's how the spirit dreamed, standing by a small lake and crafting his desirable future silently. Being submerged in thoughts, Hon didn't notice newcomers, who curiously, or more amusingly, watched a stranger in their homeland. When they walked from the hiding, Hon awoke from his daydream and turned his attention to approaching, glowing beings

"Spirits..."

Bosei's comment about sharks came to his mind. He didn't know what stunned him more - the appearance of spirits on this island, or the vast, colorful environment around.

But even the spirits were different. The most noticable difference being lack of a second tail. Instead, the one they had was unnaturally long. Hon wondered how they could casually walk and not trip over it. Spirits also appeared slightly taller than him.

He didn't realize how he was awkwardly looking at them until they came right before him. The group was made of 5 spirits, and from this distance Hon was able to figure out murmurs coming to his ear.

- Who is that?
- Doesn't he look familiar... is that a spirit?
- Oh! Is that the spirit from the legend?
- Huh? How so? That's just a legend!
- No but don't you see, he has two tails, it's real!
- Two tails... hah!

When they approached Hon, all corrected themselves and stayed quiet for 3 seconds. And after that shouted as loud as they could:

- WELCOME TO FRIOL!!!!

Hon jumped in place and fell on his back. Instead of normal invitation he was met with scream and surprise, which seemingly came out of nowhere.

"Do they always greet strangers like that?" he thought, struggling to get up after a shock. And their message, it was unclear, as the name "Friol" got him confused.

- What... what is friol? - this time he corrected himself faster. -H-hello, I am Hon and you are... spirits - the whole conversation was going totally not like he wanted to.

Spirits looked at each other, and holding their stomachs started laughing. That made Hon even more embarrassed, his face slightly turned pink as he shyly twisted his fingers behind his back. Spirits giggled for a moment, and then started a race of responding.

- We are in Friol now silly!
- Friol is our home!
- How can you not know where are you?
- Hey, hey, he's clearly not from around okay...
- And where did you think you were?

Hon, even more confused responded to the last question:

- In E-Elysium... ?

- You are not wrong, we are in Elysium now. But the forest is so much more than that!

Hon's confusion reached its peak. It was not curiosity, but anger that started filling him. He did not understand a single thing he heard so far, which seemed as an unnecessary and annoying obstacle to his goal.

*She asked but not answer
And gathered what could.
May have appeared prancer
But with intentions good.*

Gaining more confidence, he managed to knock together a sentence.

-Alright listen, I need to know two things... First, what happened just before my arrival? What attacked me? And second, where am I after all?! - last words almost came off as a shout. The sudden outburst was caused not by anger itself, but rather, recurring fear. The moment of comfort and safety he had minutes ago was vanishing, and with that, insecurity came into play. It almost felt like he was losing something he held in hands.

Other spirits were not discouraged by the change of emotions and began, again, talking one through another.

- Oh that... it may be our fault by accident...
- Sharks don't like when spirits appear unexpectedly.
- Don't worry, they're friendly! We may just... mess with them too often.
- It must have mistaken you as another trouble maker.
- Thankfully, others who were passing by noticed your boat crushing and rushed for help!
- By the way, what brings you here, Hon?

Hon slowly processed the flood of information. So he was attacked by a shark, which apparently got angry over some spirit interrupting its territory.

"It's actually understandable, in a way" - he thought, scratching his head. - "I must have invaded the Sea of Shadows Bosei mentioned..."

Silence reminded the spirit he was asked a question. He rose his head proudly, and with courage emanating from him he said:

- I came from a distant land to solve a riddle!

Eyes of friol spirits sparkled, as all five surrounded Hon and impatiently jiggled in place.

- A riddle, it must be fun!
- Tell, tell!
- Let's solve it together!

The last words hit Hon unpleasantly, for his motivation was to prove his independence and methodical thinking to others. That he didn't require any help. That he was not helpless.

The spirit didn't let them know about the little inconvenience, and ignoring the fear sprouting somewhere deep in his heart he declaimed the riddle, as if they were the most precious words he could ever say. The words which appeared in his dreams.

The words of his mother.

*- An artificial being Where waters spin and flow
But there has never been Any familiar glow*

He looked around from above, expecting amazement and charm. But instead, all spirits had the most confused expression he ever saw.

- What... is that?

- ...

- Is everything ok?

- Spinning waters...

- This is so funny even though I do not understand a thing!

Hon was disappointed. But only for a short second, as he was used to the fact that anything that made an impression on him was no special for others.

It was always like that. Whether it was a discovery, a beautiful poem he wrote, a view he experienced, a mirage he conjured - everything that had even the slightest meaning for the little spirit, was an ordinary observation for everyone else.

That was what led to him being overlooked among all, and his shy nature did not help in standing up for himself.

So he sought a solution. Something big, impactful. That no one could just walk past. Something impossible not to notice.

And now, after the greatest discovery in his life, after the most extraordinary adventure he went through, he found courage to step from shadows of self-doubt and fulfill his greatest wish.

His dreams.

- Sooo... - he brushed invisible dust from the bag, in an attempt to shift focus away from the awkwardness of the situation - Do you have an idea where I should go next, in this... Friol?

Spirits looked at each other, still contemplating the vagueness of the riddle. One of them turned and pointed to a place between trees.

- There **is** a vortex between the islands but...

And as before, when Bosei began talking about a legend, Hon sunk into his thoughts.

His goal was within the reach. It was so close he could feel it, its presence. He could feel his triumph sprouting again, which made him smirk under his nose.

"It is time..."

He got up, which interrupted one spirit talking as Hon started thanking them. For what exactly, he didn't know, maybe to make a good impression after the previous mistake. One of them chuckled again, but Hon didn't hear that. Or did not want to hear.

The spirit slowly walked to the pointed location, with unjustified fear, but also excitement, the same he experienced when he first saw Elysium. It took him a few minutes to pass through the thicket, but with each step he slowed down more and more. As if he wasn't entirely sure whether he's ready.

The silence only raised the dignity of the moment. No birds were singing in the treetops, no waterfalls were splashing. Even the joyful laughs of spirits of this forest vanished as he wandered off. The sun shining through branches was welcoming, encouraging to follow it.

Now it was only him and the riddle. The solution.

In one step Hon found himself in a completely different place. He still stood on the mountain, but from here he had a view of the whole Friol. The world around stopped with the spirit.

He considered Elysium Falls a paradise. A place of his dreams. But seeing such a beautiful, such glamorous and delightful place, his heart melted.

Hoa spirits are known for their strong curiosity, but are also the ones who can appreciate a beauty most. That's why Hon took a while to admire this miracle of nature, which even his inner hurry couldn't resist.

As it turned out, Elysium was one of many islands in the forest. Smaller or bigger, each one felt unique yet a part of something bigger. The biggest of them all was full of already known to him palms, with two, pointy mountains outlined in the horizon.

The feeling of familiarity struck him again, this time because of the light which filled the woods. His thoughts went back to the last sunset in Hoa. Truly, good memories are worth reexperiencing.

Here however, instead of warm purple accompanying the palette of oranges on the sky, it was a deep blue, blending within trees and filling land with freshness.

His eyes moved to its source and he saw... Sakura? No, of course not. It wasn't her. But at first sight it looked so familiar...

Spirit Palm was shining near the shore. Its leaves were slowly moving to the rhythm of gentle blows. Water, which was lazily washing the sand also did it in a calm pattern. While finding those bits of natural harmony, a tear went down the spirit's cheek.

Just by looking at all that one could rest. But for Hon it was something more. Even if those images and impressions only appeared in his mind, it strengthened his relation to this new place.

Maybe it was a genuine amazement, or maybe his desperate tries to connect every detail to home, but the effect made its impact .

Then his sight went into space between Elysium and the main isle. There was the vortex a spirit mentioned earlier. Hon gasped, and started descending the mountain further. He was being careful, as if trying not to dispel those almost dream-like sights.

Hopping from one rock to another, grabbing branches, he focused his determination on this very goal.

When your dream is in the reach of your hand, you do everything to make sure it doesn't go away. Of course, water wouldn't suddenly just disappear, but precautions are never a bad thing.

With each step down, swoosh of the swirling waters were becoming more and more clear. Wind returned, breaking the spirit from stasis. Hon even thought he heard a rustle in the bushes behind, but even then he didn't take his eyes off of his destination.

....

He lept down onto the warm, golden sand. He never felt such warmth beneath his hooves, and that feeling was positively surprising. The spirit took a handful of sand, and watched it slowly pouring between his fingers. Its temperature and smoothness were uncanny.

Hon approached the vortex, and took a deep breath. So... he was here at last. The solution to the riddle. He repeated it once again in his mind.

*"An artificial being Where waters spin and flow
But there has never been Any familiar glow"*

Then he repeated it again, at loud this time, with more confidence. After that he almost shouted it, while jumping from excitement. His mood lightened, and carefulness was replaced by pure joyfulness. A vibrant laugh could be heard along the shores as he was expressing his cheer.

Hon was ecstatic. After all this time, all the efforts and sacrifices, he achieved his goal. He thought about the accomplishment, how it would be viewed by others. It was his moment of triumph, the one he yearned for for so long.

The moment he will be remembered for.

When one is excited, they see everything in bright colors. The only feeling they know is joy. The only expression is a smile. The only perspective they see is full of hope.

But as it is said, don't count your chickens before they're hatched.

While celebrating, Hon suddenly opened his eyes. He stopped in place. A realization, so obvious, only now came to his mind. It was so striking that on landing he tripped over and tumbled.

He sensed a freezing blast on his back, unable to detect whether it was the environment or his inner reaction.

This time the spirit repeated the riddle with caution.

"artificial being..."

His smile did not disappear though. Hon got up and flicked the sand off of himself.

- It... probably means something I didn't find yet - he said to himself. But another problem appeared, which slightly deformed his facial expression.

He didn't *know* what to do now. He always assumed it would be obvious once he reached the end goal. But... there he was, standing in the open before a natural formation, with no idea how to proceed.

The spirit felt heavy in one moment. Something was pulling him down, to the ground. He resisted the force, and tried to disperse any doubts. He laughed, but this time, it was a nervous laugh.

Something was wrong. And he missed it.

Sun hid behind sprawling clouds, taking the welcoming atmosphere with it. Swirling waters began turbulating, the sand beneath was cooling down. Nature further personified his rushing thoughts.

- That's still fine, after all, I'm the first Hoa spirit to ever come here... - he tried comforting himself, referring to the last words of the puzzle. But the uncertainty already rooted, and with each passing second, and more thought put to the mystery, his fear, the one he fought with, was consuming him from the inside.

- Actually... - Hon heard a soft voice behind him. Taken off guard, he blenched and instantly turned around. It was one of the spirits he met earlier, who must have followed him all over to this place.

-What... what are you doing here?! Why did you follow me! - Hon, taken over by anxiety, stepped back, pulling his bag with him. A stranger interrupting an already intense moment was not helpful.

- I... - friol spirit reddened, visibly embarrassed. - About your riddle, you didn't let me finish back in the Falls... and I was curious... and then I heard you cheering, so I thought I'd congratulate you, but... - she struggled to put together a coherent sentence.

Hon, though calmed down a little, still had the frightened look in his eyes. That spirit mentioned the riddle... and she was the one who pointed to the vortex. What else did she know...

- But...? But what? What is it? - he failed to conceal his distress, as words came out faster than he could think. He was getting more and more nervous. And he didn't know why.

- You said that you are the first "Hoa" spirit to be here... and maybe it is true but... you're not the first spirit with two tails to visit Friol. - she explained politely, trying her best not to upset the newcomer.

But it was too late.

Hon was shaking. Another inconvenience, it was too much. He was knocking the ground with one leg, his voice faltered.

- And... who-o was that-a-t first spirit - he asked, or actually demanded to know.

The wind blew, whistling somewhere on the mountain. The sound of the waves became louder. The sand was cold like snow. Shadows were playing around, as the lighting rapidly changed. Everything that only made Hon more desperate. His world was crumbling right before his face, and he couldn't do anything to stop it.

He was helpless.

His conversationalist looked at the spirit surprised.

- I thought you knew, you both share similar body features and two tails...

- Just tell me already! - Hon almost cried through shouting. He could no longer bear the tension. Time stopped. It was just him, and her.

- ... Didn't you hear about Nazo the Adventurer? I- - but she failed to finish the sentence.

Hon made a terrifying scream. He looked at her as if he saw a ghost. Or a shark. Or Nazo.

Saying nothing he ran towards the vortex. The spirit barely made it there, and immediately fell on his knees. With a mad look in his eyes he repeated *"No, no, no, no..."*

"NOO!!"

He burst into tears and didn't even try to hide it this time. His sorrow was immeasurable, and as moments ago a cheering voice could be heard, now it was only pain and suffering. He screamed again, smashing clamped fists against the ice-cold sand.

- You're... you're lying! - he turned to the friol spirit who was scared of him after the sudden outburst. - This is a lie... how? No! Just a lie! It's impossible... impossible! - but with each shout, his voice broke more and more.

The other spirit approached, with intention to comfort the crying stranger, but Hon rapidly got up, and grabbed her shoulders. Their eyes met, and the friol spirit saw the last rays of hope, fading among tears.

- Please... tell me... this is not true... - he whispered, taking deep breaths between each word.

- I'm sorry Hon...

And the sorrowful cry spread across the shores once again.

The currents spiralled with blistering speed, and the sun was completely gone. Every positive aspect of the newly-discovered forest vanished, and only Hon was left. He fell again, into the water this time.

He failed. No, he *was* a failure. Just as everyone always claimed. And they were right. His entire journey was an unreal dream, one of many. The spirit was sobbing while looking back at all he did to chase this wish. All he sacrificed.

His friends, his mother... he let them down. The supposed moment of his triumph changed into the moment of his greatest failure. The greatest failure in and beyond Hoa.

For the first time in many weeks, he took off the bag, his faithful companion. The sign of hope and a reminder of home turned into a sign of disgust and letdown. He looked at it with fury in the eyes. But in reality, he was looking at its previous owner.

- You... - he whispered through his teeth. - YOU! It's all *your* fault! Why did you appear in my life, why did you destroy it! - he continued shouting, with furiousness sparking. Friol spirit stepped back, afraid of the ongoing events.

- Who even are you! A local legend? Or another illusion! You... you tricked me! You tricked Ashi, his family... everyone! And why? For what? To gain praise? To annihilate dreams? Or both?! - his tone changed from pure sadness to unfamiliar anger.

Hon was still shaking and struggled to hold the object in his hands. He had difficulties with catching his breath.

- GO AWAY!! - and as Hon menacingly screamed, he focused all his energy left and chunked the bag into the tumultuous vortex. He watched it fly a small distance, then a splash was heard. He observed the item of revulsion drifting around the shores in a spiral and disappearing on the horizon...

END OF PART 1

Chapter 4: Turn, Turn, Turn Again [part 2]

*With grace and nimbleness she traveled in woods,
Uncovered what hidden laid since forever.
She gave but never accepted the goods,
Thus made friends she couldn't make in her life ever.*

They say paradise doesn't exist. That it's something you can only imagine.
Something unreachable.

...

But what if it turns out to be just another illusion?

Do you accept the harsh truth? Or do you continue the search for the real one...

...

The splash of warm waves woke Hon up.

The environment calmed down, and so did he. All of the natural wonders returned: the brightness of the sunshine emerged from behind clouds, the wind started whispering between leaves. Waters became still again, going back to the swirling pattern, reflecting the deep blue light of the Spirit Palm.

Such a dramatic change of surrounding made Hon feel like everything that happened just before was a dream. And that now he will complete his journey and return home... Yes. That must have been a dream.

A nightmare.

With some energy regained, he stood up. His eyes met the same sight which he tried to forget about. He couldn't, of course – so intense moments tend to stick in the memory for ages.

So he was just plainly looking. After the recent outburst, all of his anger vanished. He tried to feel it again, but it didn't work. Same with frustration, panic – strong emotions left as quickly as they appeared. Only the melancholic disappointment still lingered in the back of his mind, subtly reminding him of the unfortunate turn of events.

He was too tired to be furious again. And he did not want to. The outburst surprised him, scared even. It felt like all the grudges he had been holding back for years, in that one moment surfaced and... dispersed.

Hon's mind began wandering through the convoluted passage of thoughts.

Of course, he got the riddle all wrong. He left his precious home to search, in vain. Now he is lost in a new world, with empty hands. Hon didn't even think about how he discovered a whole new forest, his mind was occupied with this one topic. What will others think when he returns?

If he returns...

The spirit shook his head, as more negative thoughts were too much for that moment. Impulsively he reached to the right hip, but his hand met no resistance. Right. That item was gone. This was for the better, as Hon did not want to be reminded of his failure.

Still shaky, the spirit took a few steps on the shore, only to be greeted with a pair of bright eyes. He completely forgot about this local, and not only that, but he let her watch his breakdown. Hon blushed abashedly. The last thing he needed was another comment about his behavior, his immaturity. But he knew, it had to come. So he stared back in silence, waiting.

The Friol spirit carefully approached Hon. He clenched his fists. He just wanted to be over with that.

"Go on, say it!"

But the stranger gave him a warming hug instead.

Hon immediately loosened his hands. This act took him off guard but in a pleasant way. He felt like... everything was fine after all. A tear shone in the corner of his eye. Hon returned the hug.

Still a little embarrassed he mumbled: "T-thank you". The other spirit smiled.

- You look much in pain. This is the least I could do to ease it.

Hon looked at her, still with a shocked face.

- So you... won't laugh at me? Humiliate me?

Friol spirit laughed back. Her pearly voice echoed, escaping to the mountain on Elysium.

- Why, no! We all are allowed to experience emotions, even the strongest ones. But you can't let them take over you - she smiled again. Her honest expressions made Hon feel safe at that moment.

Like he was talking to a friend.

- And... What now? - the stranger hesitated for a second, but couldn't finish the sentence, as Hon sat down, turning his face to the swirling vortex.

- Don't you realize? It's over now. Everything - Hon said with a seemingly calm voice, though a grudge echoed in that response. - So what now? I don't know. I don't know...

Friol spirit gently put her hand on Hon's shoulder. He didn't react, only stared plainly at the water.

- You can't give up now! Not after everything you have been through, there must be a way...

She sat next to him, letting the breeze, whispering on the shore, bring new ideas.

Because what better way there is to find a solution than waiting for it to come?

Silence was everything Hon needed at that moment. Even though he wanted to ask the local some questions, they never seemed to formulate well enough. "Who is Nazo?", "What did she do here?", "How?", "When?" - was everything that was coming to his mind. And the last thing the spirit needed is to talk about this "legendary spirit" who destroyed his dreams, just like that.

And so he waited.

...

- I KNOW! - a loud shout snapped Hon out of his daydream. He blinked twice.

- Know what?

- Something which should help you keep doing... whatever you're doing - Friol spirit grinned. Hon didn't even smile though. He couldn't imagine anything that could have possibly helped his miserable situation.

- Listen, there is someone very wise. Someone who remembers.

- Remembers what?

- Everything of course! - she raised her hands in the act of joy. The answer did not satisfy Hon.

- Everything? Does mister Everything know where am I supposed to go, what am I supposed to find, if... *she* hadn't beaten me to it and if I ever return home? - all concerns smoothly rolled off his tongue.

- Do you always ask so many questions? - the stranger smirked. Upon hearing that Hon's cheeks turned red.

- Do you always laugh so much? - he responded, rolling his eyes.

- Of course! - she tittered, not detecting irony in Hon's response. - Anyhow, are you interested?

- I... yes, I think! Maybe... - Hon wasn't sure himself. Skepticism became his best friend for that day, who knows, maybe longer. That's why even seemingly great news struggled to lit the last flames of hope left.

Because what could have possibly...

But something could.

And now it depended on Hon, whether he would stick to this wild promise which could turn into just another disappointment, or blindly trust this newly acquired information and chase yet another solution with dim sparks of hope.

What was the right answer to that dilemma? Was there even one...?

Hon stood up, brushing off the sand. The sun was once again ending its tour on the sky, changing the world's color palette with it. Ambient whistle of the wind, combined with a soothing splash of waves created an unbelievably calm, relaxing atmosphere, into which anyone could effortlessly succumb.

Even Hon couldn't resist this small miracle of nature. Back in Hoa, he used to watch sunsets with awe, never bored of how harmonic the world is, how different colors blended together above everyone's heads. He felt it again, the feeling of nostalgia, feeling of familiarity, lingering in his heart.

- Hon? Do you hear me? - the female spirit turned her head towards him. - I was asking you if you know how to get to Kaore?

Hon blinked twice, breaking from a daze.

- Oh... yes, yes... I mean no! I don't know - the clunky response was met with yet another giggle. Hon blushed slightly again but laughed back. The reaction did not feel humiliating, it was... rather heartwarming.

- Very well - she wiped her tears, holding back an upcoming burst of laughter. - Do you see those giant mountains on the horizon? That is Ghnor's Fissure. Keep going in a straight path across the Silvergreen Forest, making sure those two are always on your left side. Remember that! Once you reach the shore, look around, but be observant!

Those instructions couldn't be more simple but unclear at the same time for Hon, but beggars can't be choosers, so he accepted what was given to him.

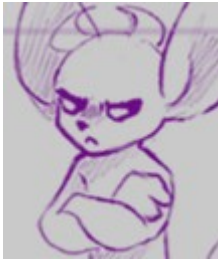
He accepted. Almost subconsciously, quickly reminding himself that only a few minutes earlier he was considering leaving everything behind. Hon looked again at the far horizon, where outlines of mountain peaks shrouded by clouds attracted the spirit with their mysterious posture and shape.

He accepted.

- Thank you so much - Hon expressed words of gratitude, thanking not only for the directions but also the mental help the stranger provided. Friol spirit smiled.

- I'm sure you will find what you're looking for, and maybe even stumble upon something which you aren't! Say, what if you find out something incredible about Nazo the adventurer? Wouldn't that be exciting!

Hon grimaced.



- No, not really.

He waved for goodbye and began walking along the circle shore towards the big island on the other side of the vortex.

- Byeeeeee! I hope you will find your bag sooooooon! - the spirit heard from the distance but pretended he hadn't heard it and focused entirely on the route.

...

As Hon was getting closer to the Spirit Shore, the deep, blue light intensified. Water at the shore was unlike any he has ever seen, the colors dancing and blending together, all revolving around the prime blue.

The shore was empty, to Hon's delight. That's also why his attention focused on the being, who made him feel tiny and even slightly intimidated.

Spirit Palm majestically towered before Hon. Its leaves swang slowly, yet momentarily. The blue light it radiated was embracing the shore with its refreshing, full of dignity aura. Light shone between the base of the bark, being almost mesmerizing in its depth. The rest of the trees paled in the shadow of the Great Being.

Wind gently stroked the crowns of the trees, in answer to which they swayed back, chasing one another. Waves of the vortex were bursting on the sand, taking every smallest grain into a swirling dance.

The whole place had an incredible atmosphere of playfulness, almost carelessness. But even despite the amusing game of nature, it still bore a sense of great importance.

When Hon was about to step on the shore's sands, he hesitated a little. Everything and everyone so far was great welcoming, but in the spirit's mind, a thought still lingered. That in reality, he didn't belong there, that he is an obstacle.

Even more so because the sole purpose he came here for turned out to be a pipe-dream. He stopped in place.

It surprised him, why did he continue despite a dramatic revelation that occurred? Why still ford in the sea of uncertainty, when the life ring has drowned?

Hon couldn't answer those questions, as much as he wished. At first, he wanted to just end this, go home and forget about all those events, but on the other hand... Something was pushing him forward, highlighting every slimmest ray of hope, turning them into a blazing light. Something helped him not succumb to grief and continue his journey.

Something, or *someone*...

Hon took a step forward.

Entering the shore evoked memories of home, when he used to sit by the roots of Mother. Sit and observe leaves falling, water flowing, the sun rising. Now he was there, again, ready to curl between the roots and just be with Her... He couldn't, obviously, fulfill the last wish, but the sense of familiarity he felt before was enough.

The spirit carefully approached the Spirit Palm, delicately placing hooves. It certainly reminded him of Mother. He longed so much for that memory...

He sat next to the bark of the Great Tree.

Having troubles coming up with something to say, Hon remained in silence. Words were not needed, he let his feelings tell the story themselves.

But that was not enough. Having so many possibilities of starting a dialogue, he decided on one. The most well known to him. The simplest.

- When I first got here, I was excited... excited to explore new lands, uncover mysteries, achieve honor, pride, ...something. Even though I was misguided, I pushed forward. But why...

...why did that have to happen?

I was so close, yet a spirit from my own forest betrayed me... Is that the right word? No, that's what I thought at first. I can't shift the blame to others to feel better... Can I?

I should feel happy, shouldn't I? Something... *one*... from home engraved a mark here, which should keep me closer to a place I was afraid of leaving.

But I feel... bitterness. As if something was taken away from me. Though can something I never had been missing for me? It appears so...

So why am I still here? Why am I holding to uncertain possibilities that could hurt me again? Why am I still pushing forward... – Hon looked up, his sight meeting majestically moving, enormous leaves, and the Light, pulsing at the top. He touched the bark, carefully but with great emotions.

Hon wanted an answer, *the* answer. The spirit kept the hand on Spirit Palm, searching in the deepest parts of his mind for a solution to that riddle.

Closing eyes took him back home, to the memory of sitting like that with...

– Mother...

One word was enough for Hon's mind to clear, at least partially. Someone he loved, someone who always took care of him, encouraged to reach beyond his capabilities... and it was that habit, which had rooted in his heart long ago, that kept his inner spirit motivated, eager to experiment, lifted after repeated failures...

Hon opened his eyes. The new understanding resolved his battle of thoughts and concerns. Now it was much easier to continue the journey, knowing he wasn't doing all that just for everyone around or himself... but also for her.

– Thank you – the spirit smiled, rustle of leaves being what he heard in response. With energy returning to him, Hon stood up. At that point, he began to see the world with brighter colors.

The infamous before vortex was now gracefully swirling in a pattern matching the slow swinging of trees. The mountain on Elysium stood proud, blooming in unseen before hues, waving to Hon with all of its trees, bushes, and flowers.

On the sand the spirit noticed a shining object. It was a shell, big as his fist, in the shape of a twisted wave. It reflected the sunlight in its almost glass-like, purple surface. He picked it up, and held above his head to see the reflections diffusing in all directions.

Even though the sun was still almost completely hidden behind the line of the horizon, Hon was ready to embark on the adventure right away. The spark in his eyes returned.

Before leaving the shore, he took a last, final look at the waters between islands, or more at the one associated with them. Now he had a new item, reminding him of not just home, but the change that occurred in him. And the item was his, alone.

– I hope our paths will never cross again – and with that said, Hon turned back and entered the woods.

...

– Nazo? I can't believe it! This is the best day of my life!

Hon froze in place. Not even a full day has passed, and the name which he wanted to erase from memory came out of nowhere. He looked around, searching for the source of the exclamation. Moving grass and plants revealed the location of the voice.

Before the spirit appeared a large crab, two times bigger than him. Its cyan shell was covered with some murky seaweed, which certainly did not make it look better, at least in Hon's opinion. The creature was looking at Hon with its piercing eyes, rapidly knocking its sharp claws to express excitement over the encounter.

- I'm not Nazo - Hon responded, shocked with the wild statement. The crab's eyes opened wide as he circled Hon multiple times.

- How come! You have two tails! And you're so short!

Hon rolled his eyes after the last remark. *"What if everything else is just so big"* he thought.

- And who could you be... ? - curious about a new being Hon tried to at least learn *something* from this unfortunate encounter. The crab snipped two times.

- I'm a Karbid of course! And you are Nazo the Adventurer!

- I'm no- - Hon gave up in the middle of the sentence. He shrugged. The spirit tried to walk away with resignation but the karbid crossed his path.

- Ah wait! You are missing something, no? Where is your bag! - the crab snipped again, drawing a bag in the air.

- It was never mine - Hon, slightly annoyed, was getting tired. - Now if you excuse me, I have a forest to traverse.

- Of course you are not her! Apologies, not-Nazo! But you know, we don't see ones like you very often, mistakes can happen. In fact, I have never seen anyone like you.

Hon was confused.

- Then why... how do you know...

- The legend! - karbid interrupted the spirit. - And old legend, forgotten, but some still cling to its words. I never really believed it, you know, but seeing you! Here! It all must be true!

- All... what? Another solved riddle by her? I don't know, maybe she discovered the sun and graced everyone with her genius once again - Hon replied ironically. The last thing he wanted to hear was another great accomplishment of his homeland relative.

- Maybe, who knows!

Hon was shocked how inhabitants of Friol were impervious to any sarcasm.

- But no, no, I was referring to the gift! - karbid chortled. Unamused Hon only shrugged.

- My grandma's greatest treasure was a shell she received in her young days. But not just any! The most marvellous shell on the island! Grandma insisted that it was a spirit with two tails who gave her the present, though I never really believed her. But seeing you, now, here, it must have been Nazo, no one else! Grandma's story was true!

- Incredible - Hon said with no reaction on his face.

- Grandma said that after the two-tailed spirit rescued her from entangled roots, they became best friends. They would dive, sunbathe or even mischievously startle unacquainted ones. Oh but it wasn't as troublesome as what spirits perform now, no. Every prank had even the smallest moral conveyed...

...Grandma is gone now... and the shell was lost. Somewhere, no one knows. But I don't need it for the memory of grandma to live in me, I will always remember her incredible story!

Hon's expression changed. He looked down, as if he was embarrassed. After thinking for a minute, he handed something to the karbid.

- Here... take this - it was the shell he collected on the shore. - You're right. I don't need an item to anchor my thoughts, memories and feelings. They will live inside me. Forever.

He smiled as the karbid carefully placed the shell on his back.

- It may not be as marvellous as your grandma's but... I hope it will brighten your mood whenever you think of her now.

The karbid turned around a few times, causing the shell to reflect the light into different directions, every time with a different color.

- It's beautiful! It's glamorous! Thank you, my friend! Allow me to give you something in return - having said that, the crab disappeared in the bushes. Hon pensively looked up.

Friend.

How long has it been since he heard that word...?

The karbid quickly returned, bringing a big, shiny, snow-white pearl with himself.

- Looks incredible, but it's impossible to keep it on the back, it always slides down whenever I move - karbid confessed. - Have it as a sign of my gratitude!

Hon smiled again, crossing his arms.

- No no, keep it. Who knows, maybe one day you will find a way to proudly wear it.

The crab snapped twice in the air.

- Generous but modest, just like in the story! Just like her! Farewell now, not-Nazo! I wish you meeting her one day, you two have so much in common!

The karbid toddled into the deep woods again. Hon, dissatisfied and seemingly absent from the world for a minute, stared at that spot for a while, until he mumbled:

- I suppose...

And continued the journey.

...

- No one told me there would be a cliff on the way!!!

Hon was standing by the river, before a tall cliff wall. The rushing river hit the stone once in a while, causing a splash going up even over half of the wall's height.

Travelling through the forest was not always simple, especially because of many bushes, vines, roots and plants tangling on the ground. A quarter-hour couldn't pass without Hon tripping over something. He certainly could not trip over a high cliff however.

He sat down. Conjuring a bridge across the river was risky, too risky. He did not wish to get distracted by pounding waves and fall into the water from a high spot. Clueless as to how to deal with another obstacle, he just watched the river flowing far away.

And as the river vanished in the distance, the spirit noticed a movement. There were other spirits, playing by the water. With nothing else to do at the moment, Hon focused his attention on the glowing pranksters.

Some of them were hanging from trees on their incredibly long tails, others were just laying around or cheering. Seconds later, a spirit flew down the cliff with an accelerating speed, making a loud noise in the process. No, "flew" was a bad term. That spirit held onto some sort of a line, or vine, using which they got down in no time. Their friends caught the flying companion, causing them all to roll a few metres on the sand. Loud laughs echoed along the shore. Another volunteer was preparing for the swing.

And thanks to their play, Hon got the idea.

He quickly checked the surrounding trees, thankfully one of them had its highest branch reaching half across the river. Hon climbed the tree. Standing on a wobbly spot just below the long branch, he closed his eyes for a second. A fear of height certainly did not help the situation.

Hon imagined the vine spirits played with, how its long, elastic shape stretches and bends. How it carries him across the gap, gently unravelling itself afterwards. He never was exceptionally good with Mirage, and on top of that, most of his summonings

were static objects. At that moment though, he had to focus all his skill towards this activity. Because on that depended whether he succeeds and safely manages to get to the other side, or he fails and falls with an accelerating speed into the river.

Hon took a deep breath.

Waving his arm in a special manner, a string made of light wrapped around the tree branch. It worked, better than expected. Now to the easy (or, quite the contrary, hardest) part... swing on it to the other side of the cliff.

Wind started blowing harder, right in the spirit's face. He squinted his eyes. The tree got all wobbly, swinging just like the playing spirits did, almost causing Hon to fall down. The light vine blinked a few times. Hon felt it fading in his hands.

There was no more time.

- Here goes nothing!

Hon jumped.

Air crackled around him as he glided, stuck to the faint mirage. World stopped existing, it was only him, the vine, and the cliff. He screamed, immediately regretting the idea. But there was no way back, so he flew towards the rocky wall. He was hoping other spirits couldn't see him panicking like that.

Unfortunately Hon realized a grave mistake he made a bit too late.

Even when swinging, he could not possibly gain velocity and height needed to reach the other side for sure. That meant one thing - he had to *actually* fly. Cover a distance completely suspended in the air.

Hon made big eyes, thinking about his whole life in a span of a second and preparing to execute the deadly jump. Wind got even stronger, slowly reducing his speed.

The light vine was almost entirely transparent.

Another scream could be heard along the river's shore as Hon chaotically let go of the mirage. He was waving his hands rapidly, with one goal - cling to the stone shelf. The objective was a meter, half, quarter away... so close...

...and he missed.

Hon plummeted, unable to catch any protruding rocks.

He was so close, yet it was not enough. Furious at himself, the spirit felt the rushing adrenaline as he shouted:

- Oh no you DON'T!

Another light vine whizzed, cutting through the rampant winds. It wrapped around the very edge of the wall, saving Hon from an inevitable crash. If swinging on a mirage was hard, then climbing on it up the cliff was in no way simpler or more enjoyable.

Being smart enough not to look down, Hon began the climb. No longer torn by the wind so much, he pursued upwards. Entirely focused on the conjured vine, and with the most determined look on his face ever, the spirit cautiously grabbed the light one by one. Step by step.

“Patience”

With that thought stuck in his mind, without any sudden movements, he continued. The cliff was almost within the reach...

Hon grabbed the ledge with the rest of his energy remaining and collapsed on the ground.

Safe.

Laying on his back and deeply inhaling, Hon couldn't believe himself. He would have never done such dramatic and blood-curdling action back home, yet when it came to that, he managed to stay alert and rescue himself. Truly, a great danger can bring out the most of someone.

However, fast reflex was not everything Hon learned from the accident.

The new technique he discovered was apparently a perfect solution to his recent, annoying problem - tripping. Hon was convinced that with enough practise, he would be able to swing from one branch to another on the mirage, without having to bother about any inconveniences creeping after him.

Excited about a new revelation, he hastily stood up to try out the idea right away. But the light line failed to even wrap around the tree, and it vanished shortly after.

Hon blinked. Of course, no one guaranteed it would work every time. He knew there was a lot ahead of him, but the spirit was looking forward to exploring his newly acquired skill.

With patience.

...

A graceful spiral flashed in a dim area, heavily overgrown with trees. Swish, spin, another flash. And another.

Hon landed gently on the ground, dispersing the mirage lasso.

Practise makes perfect, and there could not have been a better example than Hon. Since the almost-fateful event, he had been learning and improving his ability every day. Every day he would execute countless failed tries, until one finally worked. After

countlessly bumping into a tree, he learned to manage his trajectory. Hon learned to aim his line with an incredible precision, allowing him to fly through the air, swinging between trees.

Not only that, but his inner artist adjusted the visual part of the move - instead of a plain, straight vine, the mirage was flexible, curly. Its thin structure helped the line to bend easier, travel lighter. Hon was not of a big posture too, thus he could swing with more nimbleness. Swiftly wrapping around leaves, branches, barks, created an illusion of a lightning soaring through the forest.

He wasn't doing that to impress anyone, as he rarely encountered any inhabitants. Adjusting, altering and experimenting was his new hobby, not a performance.

Over time, the ability started becoming something more than just a mirage. The lasso became an extension of Hon's arm, allowing him to go as far as even pull himself towards the tangle, making him less dependent on the velocity gained from a previous swing. With each and every use, he was able to bend it more and more, going beyond what he thought was possible to conjure.

Hon was satisfied with the skill. Of course, there was always room for improvement, and he used every opportunity to try and tweak the line even more so it fit his needs.

Even though the spirit tried his best to remain discrete, there always would be someone who would notice the magical light flashing and blending with sun rays, melting in the air only to reappear again. And that's exactly what happened.

- Excuse me, hello! Wait for me!

Hon turned around and noticed a spirit running towards him, waving their hand as if trying to catch the flying Hoa spirit.

The stranger approached him, clearly being out of breath after chasing Hon for who knows how long. Despite their poor state, the spirit was smiling from ear to ear.

- Hello! ... huff ... Hello I'm very glad to meet you, your ... huff, puff ... your light thingy looks so increeee-eh, eh, -eedible! I've never seen such a sight befoooo-oh, oh, huff... -oore, so light, so agile, graceful, absolutely amazing!

Hon looked at the spirit, surprised that someone actually found his skill impressive. The need to please others, the need so strong, which was initially the reason he embarked on the adventure, vanished after the time spent in the exotic forest. He no longer attached his success to approval of others, and that's why he found the compliment encouraging and heartwarming, not something he craved.

He smiled back.

- Thank you, I never thought of it that way actually... it means a lot.

The Friol spirit grinned.

- You certainly don't realize how exceptional your ability is...

Before he could finish, they heard a crack above their heads.

- WATCH OUT, A COCONUT- - and in the same second, the Friol spirit was gone, literally. Hon, extremely confused about what just happened, forgot that the spirit's message had a warning in it. Another second later he felt something hard hitting his head, leaving a soaring pain in the point of collision.

Hon flopped down, curling in pain, though he may have overreacted, as a minute later he was back on his legs, searching for the murder weapon.

What he found was his new friend, holding a coconut with both of his hands. They looked at each other, and both asked a question at the same time:

- You can teleport?

- You have two tails?

Both also answered simultaneously:

- Yes.

- But it's more complicated than that... - spirit with the coconut quickly followed up with an explanation. - When I am in danger, I can blink to a safe location. It's almost like an instinct.

Hon couldn't believe what he just heard.

- And you call my mirage... *ability* impressive? Just look at what you did, it was impossible!

The spirit snorted, looking away.

- So impossible that every spirit in Friol can do that, some can even control where they end up. I can't even do *that*, needless to mention special abilities others use left and right, with only me being ordinary in every way. When I saw you, I was just so thrilled and inspired, I needed to know who is flying with such grace and nimbleness!

Hon listened attentively, and when the stranger finished, he sat down, clapping the grass next to him in order for the worried companion to join him. And he did, still holding the coconut.

They were sitting together for a while, watching as clouds drifted lazily in the sky. Ghnor's Fissure loomed from behind Silvergreen Forest, spreading its mysterious, even frightening appeal over the area.

- Say, what even is it? The Fissure I mean - Hon took the opportunity to spark a conversation, as well as learn more about the mysterious peaks. Friol spirit looked up, concentrating on the view.

- To be honest... I've never wondered what lies in there myself. It is said that once, the two summits were one. Because spirits living within the mountain did not get along quite well and often had arguments, the mountain split in two.

- A charming story - Hon admitted, this time without any subcontexts.

- Speaking of number two, you have two tails! That must mean you're related to Nazo the Adventurer, right? - the stranger turned to Hon with a sparkling look on his face.

Hon grimaced. Even though he got used to people mentioning *her* name in his presence, it always provoked a negative reaction. He suddenly felt cold, just like when...

There being no way around the topic, he answered honestly:

- I'm not sure but... that's where all facts point to.

The answer completely satisfied the spirit with coconut.

- But that's unbelievable! I will admit, at first I thought you were her... - Hon rolled his eyes. - You must be so lucky, having met such an exceptional figure!

- I... have never met her, and to tell the truth I hope we will never meet. I don't even know what does she look like. How do *you* know about her anyway, you seem to know a lot about the subject.

Friol spirit jumped on his hooves and waved his hand, inviting Hon to follow him. He did.

Walking a few minutes towards the great mountains, they got to an even dimer area, where silver mist gently entwined surrounding palms. In the middle stood a spirit well, though it bore multiple imprints left by time and who knows what else. The structure did not glow, which struck Hon when he noticed it.

Friol spirit approached the well, and braced himself against one of its stones.

- Folk legend says that this spirit well was found by Nazo the Adventurer, which she uncovered from entangling it for almost a century vines and moss. She managed to bring back its shape as you can see, but the well remains unusable till this day.

Hon was curiously examining the structure. It differed from spirit wells in Hoa, but the main idea behind it was familiar. Familiar were also some bondings used to keep the parts together. He mumbled to himself:

- So she isn't as perfect as she seems after all...

It gave him a twisted feeling of satisfaction.

- I stumbled upon this spirit well a year ago, and since then I was interested in the history behind it. I asked the builders to try and repair it, though they said that it was not a normal damage, at least not one they could undo. During this year I was searching for

more information about Nazo, hoping that an answer to this problem will be clear when I find... something, I don't know.

Hon took his eyes away from the well, struck by the last sentence. It almost sounded like...

... what he has been doing himself. Searching for an answer to an unresolved problem. One question came to his mind.

- Why... why are you trying so hard to repair this broken well?

The other spirit moved anxiously, without giving an answer. Hon continued:

- I'm sure there are other spirit we-

He immediately looked straight into Friol spirit's eyes. That one stepped back, scared by the sudden reaction. Hon understood.

- You want to be *someone*. To come out of the shadows of *others* and be recognized, don't you?

Stranger dropped both the coconut and his jaw.

- How do you... who... - tears appeared in the corner of his eyes.

- Because I am... *used to be* like you. Do you know why I came here in the first place?

Crying spirit shook his head.

- *An artificial being Where waters spin and flow, But there has never been Any familiar glow.* These are the words of a riddle that no one could solve back in my home forest. One night I discovered a map by accident, leading straight to this place... And why all that? To show I can do *something*, I can be proud of myself, I can live with my head raised.

Hon turned around to the path they entered the small grove, looking deep into the woods, well beyond what he could see.

- ...But all of that stopped mattering when I realized that despite my failure, I can go forward. That opinions of people are not what defines me, and are not what motivates me to stand up and continue. Don't do things for the show, do them out of your passion.

Friol spirit sobbed and wiped the tears.

- You're right... I shouldn't be running after the approval, I should be flowing with my interests and desires!

"Flowing..."

- Of course! - Hon flicked.

- Yeah!

- No I mean, I know how to fix the spirit well! - Hon chuckled, explaining his reaction.

- Oh um... still, yeah!

Hon checked the stone frames. They had special carvings running along the top. He conjured a mirage that fit precisely into the simplest spot marked on the well. When he put it in place, the rune shone brighter for a moment, growing tiny light plants too. Just as he expected.

Hon turned back to the other spirit. Mirage disappeared, but he got the right idea.

- If I correctly recall the old scroll from the Library, during a full moon, you have to insert light into those carvings, starting from this one - he pointed at a small stone - and continue in order towards the north. You need to make the light flow in the well again.

Friol spirit repeated every step again to make sure he remembered. He looked shocked at Hon.

- How do you know so many things like that... You're a true genius! If you could only- - a frightened expression ran across his face. - ...But you won't disappear like Nazo the Adventurer... will you?

- Disappear? What do you mean?

The other spirit looked down.

- One day, Nazo left Friol. She was just... gone. No one knew where did she go... All that is known is that she needed to attend something. A ceremony I think... And no one would see her ever again, that's why the memory of her is faint.- he looked at Hon again with a hopeful look in his eyes. - ...So you will stay here? You could wait until the full moon and repair the well, or... even just teach us so much...

Even though Hon knew the answer, he hesitated a little. He felt the sincere sadness coming from that question, and he hated to confirm it but...

- ... I'm sorry... but I have my own well to fix - he smiled. - And I'm sure you can figure things on your own if you put enough effort, practice, and heart into it.

Friol spirit sighed, but replied with a cheerful tone:

- I will be sure to follow your advice, and keep the memory of you around here! Just like of Nazo the Adventurer! And... before you go... - he picked up the fruit he dropped from the ground. - Would you like to eat the coconut with me? As a form of saying goodbye.

Hon widened his eyes.

- You *eat* that?! That thing almost killed me!

Friol spirit started laughing so much that he dropped the fruit again.

- The milk inside is delicious, and the pulp is not bad at all!
- M-milk?... Tell me everything you know about this coc-o-nut!

They spent another hour eating and talking about coconuts.

...

Stars during that night shone with an exceptional brightness.

So much that Hon dispersed the lasso, stopped in place and watched them for a while. Wind delicately blew among the silver woods, and the mist itself added to the eerie atmosphere surrounding that night.

Hon once again went back to Hoa in his thoughts... On such a night, his adventure began. Seemingly calm evening turned out to be one of the most exciting, stressful and important moments in his life.

Hon searched for two stars he always used to point at. Ashi named one "Shin", and the other Hon named "Yu". They believed that those words combined mean "best friends".

The spirit observed the stars for the first time when he was stargazing with his fox friend.

...

- ... Hon?

- Hm?

- Have you ever wondered... how the world, the space looks like...

- Maybe a little... - he met a telling look from Ashi. - Fiiine, ... I have, but not *too* much.

- Say, if you could... would you go and explore lands beyond light, beyond earth?

Hon took a minute to think.

- N-no... - this time the answer was honest. - I... wouldn't possibly bring myself to leave Mother, you, Hoa... I just can't.

Ashi observed the clear sky, until he directed Hon's attention towards a certain light. Even though it was the brightest shining star in the black sky, it still took a while for the spirit to find it.

- Look! That one reminds me of Spirit Sakura's light... and it spreads its glow across the whole sky... Just like here.

Hon led his eyes after the celestial object, searching through the sky for more miracles of nature.

- And it bonds with another one, just as bright, over there! - he pointed at a thin line of light connecting the two peculiarities.

- How adorable... Do you think they are best friends? Like us?

- Who knows... But I would imagine so.

They laid together, observing subtle movements of glimmers, and the strange trail of golden dust between them.

- What do you think are their names?

- I don't know... what do you think?

- ... I know! Let's call them "Shin...

- ... Yu" - Hon finished the sentence, with a huge smile. "Shin Yu", an old word used to describe a strong friendship, very well known to the pair as they used to roam in the burrows a lot, uncovering many secrets and relics.

- You one clever plushie...

- You walking dictionary...

Both started laughing, but not too loud in order not to make too much noise.

They stared at the gleaming lights, imagining wandering among them, bouncing on clouds, flying in the open sky.

- We will come here again tomorrow, right? - Hon asked, looking at the fox with excitement painted on his face.

- And the day after, and after... - Ashi smiled. - It will always wait for us.

Hon turned his head to the stars again.

- And we will always come here... together...

...

Memories of peace and solace during stargazing naturally came to his mind when he looked up.

Shin and Yu shone just as brightly and otherworldly as usual. Hon noticed them right away.

"... And we will always come here together..."

- I miss you Ashi...

A tiny tear dropped from his cheek, just like a shooting star drops from one end of the sky to another.

The moon, so grand and striking, powerful and standing out amongst small glitter, allured Hon with its charm. A symbol resembling constant change, was at that time also a symbol of the change he experienced, and the change he anticipated.

The spirit didn't notice when the grass smoothly blended with sand. Only when his hooves touched the gently catching waves did he realize he arrived at the other shore.

Ghnor's Fissure was left behind in the fading fog, the silver forest, Elysium, the vortex... all of that now behind Hon, stepping back for new experiences to take their place.

Hon looked around. A peaceful night on a peaceful shore, no sound except ocean waves, no light except the celestial lanterns.

One thing was missing.

Someone who supposedly could help the spirit was not there, *nothing* was there. Only calming nature performing another cycle of day and night.

Hon was close to letting his frustration take over again, he was not ready for another disappointment. His hands were slightly shaking, his breath was slowly escaping...

"Be observant"

"With patience"

Unlike the familiar stars, he couldn't possibly notice an unknown being in the middle of the night. He had to search, just like he did during the first stargazing.

After lifting every stone, uncovering every bush, climbing on every tree he came to a conclusion that unfortunately he was right. No one was there.

Was it *her* fault again... ? What if *she* was here too and met with Him...

"Be observant"

Waves on that shore were different from the ones in the vortex. Back there, they were flowing steadily, all together in one, spiral manner, in one direction. Here, Hon barely could see water rings forming on the sea, vastly expanding, only to vanish upon grazing even the smallest pebble.

At least that was *something*.

Hon paddled in the shallow water, not taking eyes off of the odd behavior and trying to recall the name of the knowledgeable being.

- Konar- no... Karo-e... Kaore!

The last thing left to do was to call the mysterious creature, even though Hon already expected his cry to be met with silence...

... And in that moment the sea rumbled. So unexpectedly and strongly that Hon shrieked and tripped over his own tails. The waves ascended, reflecting wonders of the night sky, and when they fiercely fell down...

... An enormous squid stood, or more accurately, laid before Hon on the beach. It remained partially in the ocean, having its body blending unnoticeably with the water, with his tentacles lazily moving in the shallowness, twisting and spreading.

Even if Hon wanted, there was no way he could notice the deep-blue appearance of the guardian when it hid underwater, despite its exceptional size. The squid had incredible camouflage abilities, hence one would have to be particularly clever to tell between the ocean environment and the masked creature.

Eyes blinking non synchronously made the spirit feel a bit uneasy, but at the same time he couldn't take his eyes off of the unnatural sight.

The area remained the same, peaceful. Kaore's arrival did not bring any attention nor cause any disturbance, which seemed impossible for Hon, yet it happened. And as the forest remained silent, so did the guardian.

Hon, unsure whether to initiate dialogue or wait, nervously twisting his fingers. After a couple of minutes of planning the words, he started:

- H-hello... Are you Kaore? My name is Hon - the spirit almost forgot about the introduction, so he blushed out of embarrassment. Minutes of careful preparations crumbled in a second.

- Hhrmm... A Hon... A book... One thing...

Kaore spoke slowly and lengthily, his voice was powerful and deep, just like the depths he dwelled in. Unfortunately the spirit could not decipher what the guardian meant by that strange remark. He did not give up though.

- I came here because... someone told me that you could help me...

Squid's one eye blinked, then second.

- ... I am on a journey to solve a riddle, but it turned out that- - he took a pause here - Nazo the Adventurer was in Friol before me and...

- Hhrnm... A Nazo... A riddle... A calling...

Hon, a little anxious but still calm, continued, paying little attention to weird insertions.

- ...And now I'm lost and I don't know where to go, where to look next... I was thinking... Could you tell me what I am supposed to do next?...

The only response was two blinks, one after another.

Hon realized that he didn't give any clues for the squid yet, so he brought up the riddle, rooted in his mind for so long.

- *An artificial being Where waters spin and flow, But there has never been Any familiar glow...*

But before he could say anything else, Kaore responded, also in rhymes.

And so, one day when exploring, a calling she heard.
No one would stop her, and she wouldn't stall.
In one second world around has spiraled and blurred,
The charm she left behind would suddenly fall...

Hon, completely disconcerted at that point, managed to stammer:

- What... what is that? What does it mean...

He felt very helpless, in the presence of a towering being, with no understanding of the poem.

- The last strophe of Tale of Nazo the Adventurer... You remind me of her a lot.

The first words Hon could understand were the catalyst for his increasing inner anger and frustration. He couldn't hold himself back any longer.

- Wherever I go, whoever I talk to, everyone compares me to her... Why?! Who was she that we have sooo much in common?! I don't even know who she is, but all of a sudden whatever I do, brings back the memory of her *fantastic* achievements. We are nothing alike!

- You are more alike than you think... And you have certainly met before... hrmm... - Kaore replied with his deep voice, instantly cooling Hon's temper. - The apple does not fall far from the tree...

Hon, still annoyed but appeased, didn't want anything more than an answer to a question that has been bothering him since the very beginning...

- Then who... Who is she... ? I've never heard her name until I came here...

Kaore blinked with left, then right eye, raising all his countless tentacles.

- You have certainly met... but you may know her under a different name...

You should know her as...

... The Spirit Sakura.

Chapter 5: Nazo the Adventurer

Painting is like dancing.

When you make a stroke, the paint follows your steps, but does its own on the way. You paint in a rhythm, to the beat, slowing down and speeding up as the inner music plays. The choreography you imagine allows you to depict an image, cohesive and harmonic, beautiful and mesmerizing.

In a dark cave, where a faltering flame was the only source of light, a spirit was performing such dance.

She waved the brush left and right, weaving a painting from her imagination. When she spun, the stroke followed suit, when she jumped, the paint followed her trail. A clear idea and harmonic spontaneity interwove each other, creating a unique piece.

Every now and then the spirit took a quick break to lighten another torch, viewing already made progress. The painting was coming together, although at a slow pace. That did not worry the painter though, as she had a whole night just for herself and her masterpiece.

- Naaaazoooo!! Are you theeeereeee?

The spirit jumped as if she heard a ghost, the miraged brush she was using disappeared because of focus disruption. Completely absorbed by the dance with the painting, Nazo forgot about the world's, and by extension her friend's, existence.

Her hideout was in one of the abandoned corridors of the Burrows; total seclusion was what she often desired. The way straight to the surface led through a tight tunnel which, despite being noticeably tight, was still big enough for a spirit to travel through. That was also a way of quick communication with anyone outside, as finding a way through the actual Burrows bordered with luck.

No one could ever find her there. No one, except Himi.

Himi, a dark fox and Nazo's best friend, knew all of her secrets, being one of the few people she got along well with. They were similar in more ways than they could imagine, most notably in being courageous to the point of getting themselves into dangerous incidents. That's not to say the courage hadn't ever mixed up with carelessness, but those ended up being valuable lessons for the friends.

Sometimes though, Nazo alone fled into the realm of dreams. Be it painting, reading, skygazing or just wandering, she could fully indulge in the activity, losing contact with the world around. Fortunately for her, Himi was always there to interrupt flowing thoughts of the spirit when needed.

The two complimented each other, and a smile was rarely absent from their faces.

This time however, the fox was more nervous than usual.

- Noooo! It's just my ghost talking with you while I am relaxing on a palm beaaaach!

A chuckle echoed in response, but her friend immediately retained his composure.

- Nazo, we seriously need to go...

Nazo rolled her eyes, annoyed by the fact that her peaceful evening was being interrupted out of nowhere.

- What's so important that it can't wait? I haven't even reached half of my painting!

She couldn't see Himi, but his somewhat shivery voice revealed the weight behind the call.

- The Spirit Sakura... she... it is the time, Nazo... we have to-

- Give me two minutes.

Nazo's expression and attitude changed instantly. All anger, annoyance, irritation vaporized, and their place took melancholy and... emptiness.

The painter clenched her fists.

She knew what was about to happen, she knew ever since she left the islands but... the reminder still struck her unpleasantly. And so while painting gave her solace, it was a deliberate attempt to escape from what she feared to face.

The frightening truth...

...that Mother was dying.

Though Nazo had spent more time beyond Hoa than in the forest, her connection to homeland was growing greater and greater each time she returned. In her eyes, flowers were blooming with even more colours, waters were flowing even more soothingly, the air was cozier...

...and Spirit Sakura was growing older.

After every adventure Nazo would visit her, sit by the familiar roots and tell new stories. About her ventures, new faces she met, new lands she wandered through.

Her favorite time for that was sunset. The brightest star escaping beyond the horizon always reminded the spirit of a chapter coming to a close. Often she would talk until falling asleep, enjoying safety and care she lacked far away.

Despite the appearance of the spirit tree changing, the relationship between Her and Nazo remained the same, strengthening every time the adventurer came home. Nazo was always saddened at first, seeing her mother struggling and slowly withering, but the time they spent together seemed to make both of them feel better.

And just when Nazo had a thought, first such in her life, to suspend her journeys and settle in Hoa, make up for the time she was away, just *be* there for Mother...

...it was Her time to leave.

Nazo wished she had spent more time with Spirit Sakura, but at the same time she did not regret her decision to leave.

And she was upset about that.

Usually, whatever she set out to achieve, she did, and whatever goals she set herself, she reached them. That's why the realization was even more painful. Realization that this time, her wish to have both was impossible to fulfill. But she was aware of that. She had made her choice, and so was subjected to its consequences.

Nazo sighed.

Having stored the appliances in an old, dusty chest she put together one day, the spirit took a quick look at the stone wall used as a canvas. The painting was far from finished, but it could wait. Everything could wait at that moment.

Everything *had to wait*.

...

It took her only a few seconds to adjust to the darkness on the surface.

Himi was sitting there, looking somewhere deep into the woods. Upon Nazo's arrival he greeted his friend with a smile sincere but sad, stood up and swiftly readied to travel.

Nazo gracefully jumped on the fox's back (which took her weeks to practise given his size), drowning in the reddish fur, soft like a softest pillow. Its warmth would normally make her fall asleep on the spot, but that night she was completely focused.

- I'll tell you everything on the way, now let's go - her voice was quick and tense, almost hastening the fox. As she finished the sentence, they were already scurrying through the dusk forest.

- So what have you been painting this time around? - after a moment of silence Himi attempted to spark a conversation. - Another sunset? Your favorite dandelions? Or was it something connected to your latest journey?

Nazo's eyes glimmered; she smirked and fluently recited a riddled poem:

*Where waters are swirling left and right,
Where ground is pure sand and sun is bright
Live beings of light made, full of bliss,
Along with their parent, hard to miss.
Their colour is blue, their home - an isle,
Their faces accompanied by a smile,
To travel, to play, to rest and to sleep
- that's where I returned from, to my promise keep.*

- You know, even though I love your riddles, over time they're starting to be nearly impossible to solve - the fox laughed, piecing given information together. He lowered his voice. - Another forest?

- Another one! Himi, do you realize how incredible that is!? - the spirit was speaking quickly. - A whole island, filled with unknown creatures, distinct habits and perception, mysteries and secrets to uncover! Isn't that exciting?!

- Surely is - Himi grinned, sharing the happiness of his friends. - But despite all those amazing discoveries enticing far away... you came back.

- Of course I did. How could I not - Nazo replied, surprised as if she had to explain the obvious. She raised her eyes; they were approaching the place. - How could I not...

Palm beach. A mountain. A view stretching far, far away...
A night. A fest. A laughter, and suddenly... A snap. A feeling. A longing.
A farewell...

- So a landscape painting, huh?

Nazo blinked twice. She was back in Hoa, seconds later the breeze took reminiscences with it and escaped into the dim wilderness behind.

- A painting... ? A painting! Yes! But the landscape is waiting in the queue - Nazo smirked. She looked away for a moment, putting her hand on her elbow. - Since I've decided to take a break from adventuring, I was painting a map.

- A map?

- Of all places I've been to. Good to have it all in one place, isn't it - she laughed, her soft laughter echoed in the empty woodlands.

- Certainly. You will have to take me to one of those someday - Himi suggested with a spark in the eye while jumping over a fallen tree.

- Like you would ever leave Hoa - Nazo brushed the fox's head.

- You're right... but I can always change my mind, can't I? Say... how is it out there, far beyond the forest... ?

Nazo looked around, then jumped on the ground. Himi stopped, following his friend closely.

After circling a few times, she kneeled down and started digging in the middle of the ground.

- You see... It's a little like this. Like digging. At first you do something, but what exactly - you don't know. You're looking for something, but what? You don't know. You pass oceans of nothingness, there's only you and the water - or - the ground. - she continued, scratching the soil beneath. - It becomes stale, exhausting, daunting even, you start feeling like your actions are meaningless... - the spirit reached deep into the hole.

When Nazo stood up, she was holding a beautiful purple crystal of a unique shape, its many irregularities reflecting moonlight on the friends.

- ...But when you finally achieve what you're looking for... all hardships go away. You can enjoy the destination, a new world, a crystal unlike any you've seen before. *That's* why digging is worth it - she smiled.

- Sounds difficult but... appealing. I can see why you leave so often - Himi looked into the forest and sighed dreamily. - And... when will you tell the others?

Nazo looked at the crystal she was holding. She saw her face, reflected in thousands of smallest pieces, each and every looking back at her.

Straight into the eyes.

She quickly dropped the geode back to the hole.

- When the time... when the right time comes.

Himi did not continue the topic.

...

As friends drew closer to the Dandelion Lake, they noticed a clear ambience change in the forest. The woods were no longer dim and ominous, instead a soft, purple radiance was emanating through the branches and leaves, enveloping itself around the pair.

Himi slowed down, neither he nor Nazo spoke a word. After a few more leaps they arrived upon the Lake.

What they saw there was absolutely astounding but thrilling at the same time.

Every Spirit, Fox, Daar and Atma was there; some surrounding the water, others grouping on a glade in the Blossoming Forest. Despite that it wasn't yet morning, the area was illuminated thoroughly. The glade was almost in a form of stasis, no one was moving, only singular dandelions whirled above the perfectly still surface of the water, gliding towards the same target everyone had their eyes set on.

The Spirit Sakura.

When Nazo looked at the spirit tree, her legs softened for a second. At no point had she ever seen her mother in such a state.

Branches of the old tree were spread in all directions, bare and motionless. Where once blossomed flowers and grew the spirit kind, now only wind howled, stressing the emptiness left behind. Though withering, Spirit Sakura stood proud and majestic. Though her bark was dry and rotten, the light was still shining, touching each and everyone and granting a comforting feeling, so much needed now - like mother does.

All Hoa inhabitants gathered at Sakura's roots were sharing her pain, a silent murmur echoed above the Lake. Everyone was patiently waiting for the fateful moment, the last words, the Ceremony.

Nazo observed how some tended to the old roots, sobbing. She saw the Sentinel, a massive shape resting on the opposite side of the Lake. She tried to guess its emotions, with no success. The spirit looked up.

She saw the moon on its way beyond the horizon, accompanied by hundreds of thousands of stars, still shining but slowly fading as the dawn was about to begin. Down on earth, the brightest star was fading as well.

But after every moon a sun comes. Nazo, absorbed by the nostalgia, suddenly realized what else the event meant. A new sun would shine in Hoa since that night.

Its identity was as mysterious as Nazo's riddles or even Spirit Sakura herself. The spirit, having only few close friends at home, did not even attempt to figure out who could possibly take her mother's place. She tried guessing from the Sentinel's look. Failed again.

But the stone being turned its head, and with it turned everyone else. Nazo followed reluctantly. The fateful moment has come, the moment which she feared. Not even her most thrilling adventures could prepare her for what she was about to experience.

Spirit Sakura began speaking. An ethereal voice, a soft hum, vibrant and whispering could be heard across the whole glade.

Her last words.

*"My children, the time has come,
For me to grave of ash become,
For one to do what I have done.*

*Worry not, for this is how
The world revolves and spins around,
Like blooms and waves which you surround.*

*Do not cry, and do not fear,
Take notice of the nature near,
Its peace is my last gift to you, dear.*

*And just like moon steps back, away,
To greet the sun and bring new day,
I'm leaving, leaving one to stay.*

*Across the land their light will shine,
Theirs will be what has been long mine,
With Hoa, for me, here will twine...*

Time stopped. No blade of grass bent, no leaf fell, no wind blew, no being breathed. The whole forest was in a stasis; everything and everyone gazed at the spirit tree, awaiting the fateful words. The name.

... Nazo"

And after the final message, a brightest shine emanated from the Spirit Sakura. For a second a purple light flashed, eclipsing celestial sky and even the moon itself, and after that, it began to slowly dwindle. A strong whirlwind rose, pulling dandelion seeds with it and swirling around the old tree. In the distance, a loud thunder strike was heard. When the curtain of dandelions fell, the light had faded completely.

Spirit Sakura passed away.

A moment later all eyes were on Nazo. The spirit herself stood paralyzed, only hearing her name again and again not just in her head, but also repeated across the entire glade.

In her boldest dreams she hadn't even thought of this happening. She had reasons not to. And now, she was there, called out by her mother's last wish.

Those who were in front of her moved back, creating a passage to the bluff where Spirit Sakura grew.

Nazo turned around to Himi. The fox smiled.

- So this is it...

- You're talking as if I was leaving again... but now I'll always be here - she responded with her iconic smirk. - Don't forget about me.

They looked at each other for a second, which for them lasted an eternity. The adventurer took off her old, faithful bag and handed it to her friend. They exchanged a last hug, Nazo leaning on the side of Himi's head.

- Promise me... that you won't tell anyone, Himi - she whispered to his ear.

- I promise, Nazo.

The spirit turned around, only to face hundreds of faces staring at her. She stepped forward undauntedly. Though the bluff was not far away, the distance appeared greater than the view she saw atop the mountain in the exotic forest.

As Nazo walked, she was overhearing voices, sometimes being able to figure out single sentences.

"I cannot believe She is gone..."

"Who is that?"

"Has anyone seen her around?"

"Thank you, Nazo"

"I can't believe that... she was absent for most of her life and now... "

"How come it is her? This is not even her home"

"We will watch over you"

"Where was she for so much time... ?"

"It is Her decision... we must respect it"

"Impossible"

"Unbelievable"

At one point Nazo stopped paying attention to the crowd and focused on the destination. She walked with her chin up, steadily and confidently.

The closer she was to the bluff, the fewer spirits or other beings she saw. The voices became faint and distant. When Nazo spotted an ancient root, she slowed down. With each step, she noticed more and more old roots, all dry and hollow.

Upon reaching the bluff the spirit hesitated before moving forward.

Nazo was standing right next to the Spirit Sakura. Only seeing Her up close made the adventurer realize what truly happened. Her eyes slowly examined the dead tree from the base of the trunk to the tips of branches. The spirit approached one of the roots, a place where she used to tell her mother about all kinds of adventures.

She looked up. Each star reflected one memory shared there, still bright but... distant. Nazo slowly raised her hand to catch a floating dandelion. Usually she was surrounded by them... but this time only one was carried by the wind. Holding it carefully, she approached the edge of the bluff, gazing at the Dandelion Lake.

Everyone was still there, waiting. The glade was no longer shining sharply as the colours of the sky warmed up - soft oranges were blending with dark purples on the horizon. Nazo fully submerged herself in thoughts and memories, staring blankly at the gathered; at that moment, there was only her, the seed and...

- Greetings, Nazo.

The spirit turned around, pulled back from the land of her thoughts.

- Seip... - Nazo examined the ancient being she was facing, unable to construct a proper sentence. She never interacted with Seip directly, and while the Light was always together with Spirit Sakura, her presence alone was a completely different experience. - Nice to see you... again.

- As it is to see you - the ethereal voice of Seip was soft and echoing, almost encouraging the spirit to breathe and feel at ease. Nazo tried.

- So... you must feel really broken after... you know

- Not less than you. We all mourn the loss of Spirit Sakura equally - you as Her children, and I as Her...

- Friend?

- Not just that, it's something... more. We have been rooted together for hundreds of years, inseparable, almost as one.

- Then you must know all about Her, more than any of us - the adventurer smirked, but quickly became pensive - you must know why... it was me.

Before Seip could respond, Nazo continued, looking somewhere away.

- Of all spirits... why? Was I the smartest? Of course not. Quickest? I wish. Strongest? In my dreams. Then... why? What made me so special that...

She approached the edge of the bluff and sat down. The Light followed her, remaining silent. For a while they watched the palette of colours shifting, brightening up after a dark night. Nazo blew at the dandelion seed and watched it slowly fall on the surface of the Lake. She felt like that seed, alone in a big lake of uncertainty and doubt.

- I wasn't ever the brightest of minds... oh remember Lia? She was always sitting in the Library for hours, to the point where I asked her if books were her new diet... I wasn't the quickest too, always have been losing in races to Bieg... and Sil? He was the strongest of all of us, at least he was... many years ago.

- Did something happen?

- No it's just... ever since I started venturing further, I lost track of what was happening here. The people, the places, they were... changing. Every time I came back, Himi, my friend, would tell me about all novelties, and I was becoming more and more lost in them, up to the point where... I thought of not returning.

- But you have.

- Of course I have, how could I possibly not be with Mother when she...

Nazo started breathing more heavily.

- When I was out there, away, I felt free, I could do things I was dreaming of... but when I was coming back, apart from excitement, there was always a lingering feeling that... I was letting Her down. Of course I was happy to see Her and my friends again, but at the same time I was excited to leave once more. I really craved those moments when I could tell Her about all the different adventures I had, really... but... I couldn't stay.

- Nazo, I'm sure-

- No Seip, you don't get it. I wasn't here when She needed me most. When I was selfishly playing in all places but Hoa, She was dying. When She needed my help, I abandoned Her. After all She did for me...

Something shined on Nazo's cheek. A tear.

- And now when I... had the thought of... staying... She... She...

Nazo hid her head in her hands, sobbing. She didn't cry often, on the contrary, seeing her crying was a rarity. At that moment, however, she let all her grief and regret out, releasing what she had been carrying with her for years.

- Who... who am I to be standing here... now... After all I haven't done... I'm... I'm not worthy of this... I'm...

She wiped tears once again, with no result - the stream was uncontrollably pouring down her cheek, falling down to the Lake, fading as it touched its surface. She wished her doubts disappeared like that.

They didn't.

- Not ready?

Nazo turned around. For a moment she forgot about the ancient being accompanying her, but even that was not enough to ease the pain immediately. She hesitated.

- Not... ready?

Seip waited a few seconds before answering.

- A Spirit Tree always chooses its heir to continue its legacy, however... it is also your decision. No one can make it for you, not even... Sakura. So if you do not feel ready...

She didn't have to finish the sentence.

Nazo kept staring at the Light, processing what she just heard. She could step back; return to her adventurous life, carefree. Make place for someone she thought rightfully deserved the honor she received.

And then it occurred to her.

Things always went how she wanted them to. Whatever she set out to achieve, she did, and whatever goals she set herself, she reached them. But what if... her way was not always the right one?

It occurred to her that some things were beyond her control, some things were impossible to grasp, and that she may not need to grasp them. The choice Spirit Sakura made was Her choice - choice of someone who Nazo looked up to, who she trusted with her life. Then why would she question the decision made by someone most precious to her... ?

- No.

She stood up and brushed her face with her hand. Tears, doubts, fears were gone. She looked again at Seip, with her confidence returning.

She finally realized.

- Even though I know I'm nowhere near being perfect, I also know that I don't know everything. This decision is a surprise to *me*, but... Mother knew what She was doing. I know She did. And I trust Her - the spirit glanced over the whole glade, then at the old tree once more. - As She trusted me.

Nazo stepped forward, hanging her gaze at the first rays of sunlight emerging from behind the horizon.

- For so long I have been thinking of myself and my wants... After all she has done for me, this is finally the time I can do something for Her... something She wanted me to do.

Seip joined the spirit.

- I am happy you came to terms with your doubts. Spirit Sakura was right - your inner spirit is determined and loving.

Nazo gave the Light a surprised look.

- She did not want you to be perfect. She wanted you to be your perfect self. Greatness is not just about big accomplishments - it is also about those little experiences which make you, you. Remember the time when you gave Karbid a beautiful shell? Many would keep it for themselves, but you made your joy someone else's. By accepting Sakura's decision you showed your immeasurable love for her, and for all of us. We are all grateful Nazo, for what you want to do for us.

Nazo smiled; it was a smile of relief, a reflection of her inner peace. She sat down again, this time with her head up. Together with Seip they watched the sunrise, how a new sun was spreading its warmth across the entire forest, bringing hope to its inhabitants.

- Turns out... I actually will remain in Hoa, to look after not Her... but what She cared the most for. What I care the most for.

The sun was already fully visible, its yellows and oranges repelled the darkness and gloom of the night as well as those in the hearts of all gathered. A new day began.

Nazo stood up, giving one last, longing look at the Dandelion Lake and the glade surrounding it. She smirked, then turned to the ancient being.

- It is time, Seip.